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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers can learn from nonteachers who evaluate writing. A comparison of nonteacher and teacher responses to the same student writing revealed that the teachers were much more negative in their evaluations. Studies have also indicated that teachers did not grade according to their own declared criteria. These inconsistencies and failures are largely a result of the circumstances under which teachers evaluate student writing: Their students are all inexperienced, they have seen the same work so often that it loses all freshness, and they evaluate in an artificial situation in which the two most important elements of writing--purpose and audience--are displaced by the act of evaluation itself. Teachers also claim that they do not grade on content, while nonteachers naturally do. Perhaps leaving neutrality behind and telling students their boring papers are boring would be a help. Though there may not be any easy answers to the problems of teacher weariness and boredom, teachers should ask themselves about the assignments they give, the amount of grading they do, the criteria they are using, their attitude toward content, and their own writing practices and their relation to teaching. (JL)

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TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES IN EVALUATING WRITING

An Exploration of the Role of the Teacher-Evaluator

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First of all, I'd like to thank you for coming, especially this weekend which probably comes for you, as it does me, just before first quarter grades are due. That week is like one very long Sunday night. I don't know how you feel, but for me, Sunday night is the worst night of the week.

I've read the newspapers, done laundry, raked leaves, hugged my husband, and there at the bottom of my list, are the papers that "I really must get to this weekend."

That's one moment of truth for those of us in schools who teach writing. And although many other people in jobs outside schools also read and evaluate reports and proposals and the like at home and on weekends, what they do is different from what we're expected to do, or from what we expect ourselves to do.

Since I submitted my topic several months ago, and have been thinking about today, I've become convinced that although we should care about what happens when non-teachers evaluate writing, that our first priority should be to care about what happens to us during, and as a consequence of, our evaluations of writing. This, in order that we can act, rather than merely react, to our own outside evaluators, both the people who tell us that we aren't teaching kids to write, and the many who are supportive and who have things to teach us.

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Thus, this paper focuses on the special nature of the role of the teacher-evaluator, a specialness which emerged when I studied the evaluation behaviors of non-teachers. The responses of those non-teachers to the papers they read, and their concerns, have implications which composition teachers need to consider as they design and carry out writing programs. What they had to say served to clarify the special nature of our jobs as evaluators of writing. And it's this issue I'll concentrate on.

My journey to discover what happens when non-teachers evaluted writing began in anger. I was angry that every magazine I read told me I was a failure, that I should go back to the basics, that I couldn't write. I wondered what my critics really knew about evaluating writing. How much of it did they do? Do they care about the same things I do? Do bankers see what high school English teachers see? Do scientists see what bankers see? What am I "getting them ready for" in college, and in jobs?

I discovered that the people who agreed to work with me knew a good deal. One of the reasons why we should care about what executives, scientists, social workers and journalists think is that most of <u>them</u> write a good deal; they estimate between 25% and 75% of their time is spent either writing or evaluating the writing of others, and is often a greater portion of their workload than they had anticipated before they actually began their jobs. Therefore, they have come to value writing, and to recognize its processes and its complexities, for their writing tasks range from that which explores ideas, perhaps only for themselves, to that which may be published in a professional journal or sent to a client or governmental agency. The same information may be recast for as many as four identifiable audiences.

Many of the people I talked with would not describe themselves as evaluators of writing, but they are. The electrical engineer who manages a department, for example, receives research reports which he uses to make decisions and recommendations. He must determine, often on the basis of a piece of writing, what should be done. If the data he reads is not well documented, if the report is not well organized, if conclusions are not clear, he must "send the paper back" for revision, or confer with its writer(s), or both. An ineffective writer, however brilliant as a researcher, will find promotion within the corporation or lab more difficult.

A psychiatrist said he evaluates writing when he makes decisions about what he will read of the professional literature. He asks: will this information be useful to me? who is the researcher/writer? how is the information presented?

A public relations executive evaluates writing more as the teacher does. She edits the articles and publications her staff writes, and asks for revisions. A major concern is audience. Every piece of writing her office sends out is evaluated in light of how it will be received by the public she hopes to reach.

As you can see, these evaluation procedures are not very systematic. However, two themes ran through our discussions. One, purpose: does the writer know what he/she has to say, and is it clear? Two, audience: who will read this?

Incidentally, the non-teachers <u>are</u> concerned with the basics, with correctness, not so much as an end in itself, but because of the effects of <u>lapses</u> of correctness have on ease of reading and understanding; the credibility and care the writer projects; and on audience expectations. When they write themselves, they say they do not worry about punctuation and the like, until they are ready for a wider audience.

Perhaps because their perceptions of purpose and audience seem clear to them, they can respond directly and honestly as evaluators. They did not appear to suffer from what I eventually named "The Tired Teacher Syndrome."

The comments and attitudes, and evaluation behaviors, of high school English teachers triggered my interest in the reasons for the tiredness, and, yes, for the hostility, the frustration. The truth is not that English teachers are a bad bunch - uncharitable, inhumane, capricious. The frustration, lack of charity and hostility are consequences. The teacher of writing in elementary and secondary schools is a special kind of evaluator, and that specialness needs to be recognized, and attended to.

I collected some writings by high school seniors, and asked a number of people in a variety of professions to read and evaluate them, and to talk with me. I've already discussed some of their concerns. However, another of these panels was made up of high school English teachers. I talked with them first, and when I tabulated the results of their evalutions, read their comments, and listened to our discussion tape several times, I was first angry all over again, and then puzzled. Especially when I looked at their evaluations and comments in light of what those other occupational groups - the business executives, scientists, journalists - did and said.

High School English teachers were the least generous toward the pieces of writing they read and evaluated. They were the "hardest graders." For every paper, their ratings, on a numerical rating scale, were the lowest. Even when a paper had no major mechanical errors, some readers rated it 3 or 4, on a 10 point scale, especially when they indicated they thought organization or clarity were also poor.

Their comments upset me further. Well, I've read this all before. . . . What was the assignment? . . . What do you do with raw emotion? . . . Correct, but boring. . . . A perfectly good job by a high school writer, but uninspiring. . . . Hey! this one is so bad it's funny. . . . I wouldn't waste my time evaluating something like this. . . .

To those, I'll add one I've heard myself say. "Just once, I'd like to tell this kid how I <u>really</u> feel about this paper."

No other group of people I talked with expended so much energy or emotion on the writers and their work, and as I thought about it, no other group had the same investment or perspectives.

About this time, Joe Williams and Rosemary Hake, at the University of Chicago and Chicago State respectively, announced some early results of research they were conducting concerning teachers' evaluation behaviors. English teachers said they liked clear, direct prose, but when they evaluated papers in the Williams/Hake study - some written in direct, unflowery prose, and others in flowery, nominative style - the flowery writing received the highest ratings. In the September, 1981 <u>College English</u> Williams/Hake published results of further studies in which high school teachers, community college instructors and university instructors rated the same papers. Their results confirmed the earlier ones. In a discussion with Williams, he suggested that high school teachers' insecurities about their own language skills contributed to the responses I received, and were one factor in their study. They feel they must be "tough."

About this time, I also read a study of teacher evaluation behaviors done by a classroom teacher in the East. Teachers in her study told her they weighed content, style and organization more heavily than they did grammar, punctuation and spelling. When she looked at actual student papers they had evaluated, she discovered most comments directed at the latter.

Considering how much time writing teachers spend in evaluation, there aren't many reports about what happens during that process. Now, none of the research I've mentioned purports to be THE Truth, but it made me think: Just what is it about teaching and evaluating writing in schools which calls up the emotions I recorded, and accounts for the contradictions between what teachers say and what they do?

A number of years ago, Wallace Douglas at Northwestern identified something he named "school writing," the sterile, committee-voiced writing of "The automobile is a mechanism fascinating to everyone." or "When one looks around my room, one first sees a maple dresser." I propose there also is such a thing as "school evaluation," and its isn't all our "fault," just as school writing is not. The conditions and purposes under which we evaluate are not like those under which editors, scientists, managers, even university professors, evaluate.

For one thing, we are adults, but we must constantly read and evaluate writing by those who are not. Our writers are <u>all</u> inexperienced; they're not stupid, not irresponsible, not always unmotivated. But, they are <u>always</u> inexperienced. Inexperienced, that is, in relation to ourselves, and to most of the writers we read and admire. <u>We</u> are always aware of the possibilities Sally didn't explore, of other ways "it could have been written," or more sophisticated connections she might have made, or the "more appropriate word choice."

Hard as we may try to remember that this is <u>Sally's</u> paper, and that she worked hard and has done about as much as she could, given her age, her time and the assignment, Sally remains inexperienced, whether she's in sixth grade or twelfth. Like all writers - even us - she makes mistakes, and she's less sophisticated about disguising them.

I grant that other writer/evaluators also deal with less experienced writers. For example, the managing editor of a newspaper or an experienced executive. However, both the amount of experience, and the presumed relationship, are different for them than for the writing teacher and the writing student. And, the new reporter and young executive probably write more like their employers than an elementary or high school writer does like you, or a writer you admire.

Related to this is something one of my panelists said, "Well, we've read this all before." She referred to a paper about "The Glass Menagerie." Yes, many many of us have seen and read "that all" before. We may have written a paper about it ourselves. And while repetition in curriculum may bring comfort and expertise, it also brings boredome - at the least, weariness.

We've also seen the errors before. When we ask students to carry out research and to write, we know what we'll find: material unfootnoted that should be; sentences which would be more felicitious if combined with others; paragraphs which introduce interesting ideas that never go anywhere, are "undeveloped" in our vocabulary. We'll find observational details included because the writer knew they had to be there somewhere - and they are - anywhere.

These problems, or "errors," are not there <u>just</u> because we expect to find them. They're there because the writer is inexperienced, not yet comfortable with the form, or the subject, or us as an audience, or all of the above, and more.

On the other hand, <u>we</u> may be all <u>too</u> familiar with the form, whether it's the literary essay, or haikus, or research papers or satires. The busiest fiction editor for a publisher may read two or three manuscripts per month in the interior monologue mode; if we assign an interior monologue, we will read 60. And although we may like <u>Hamlet</u>, by the time we finish the 40th paper by the inexperienced critic, we may be ready to go to a nunnery ourselves, or more likely, somewhere much less wholesome.

When we talk with students about their writing, we emphasize purpose and audience, among other things. Those two factors - purpose and audience - affect our evaluation behaviors as well as our writing ones. I never fully appreciated that until I talked with my non-teacher panelists. Most people outside schools write to someone who wants to, needs to, hear what they have to say. The Scribners' editor looks for a book for publication - is it something people need to know or will want to read? And ultimately, will it sell, make money? The senior partner in a CPA firm reads his auditor's report with the client in mind. He needs to know just what to advise the client, and he hopes to retain the client's business for the firm.

The teacher, however, reads primarily <u>to evaluate</u>; only in particular circumstances do we have publication or financial considerations in mind. And, unfortunately, only rarely are we reading for pleasure. We read; therefore, we evaluate. This occupational hazard we share with other editors, critics and writers. However, while they generally evaluate in order to discover and/or coax what is <u>best</u>, we evaluate, perhaps too often, to discover what is <u>worst</u>. We are charged - by the public, by tradition, and I suspect, by ourselves - with reading to find errors, and then to find ways to help students eliminate those errors.

I've asked a number of teachers over the past three years, "Do you ever find you're marking a paper more for the parent than for the writer?" Almost always, the response is "yes." Let's not debate, for now, the rightness or wrongness of that. Let's just listen to the resonances of that admission. What <u>I</u> hear is this: when we're marking errors for parents, we're not addressing our audience, and we're not fulfilling our purposes for students' writing. We read not to figure our profits, but more typically, our losses, our failures.

It's little surprise that we find the errors, and it's even less a surprise that we grow tired, and cranky, and resentful. After all, many of us became English teachers because we liked school, believed writing was important, and because reading gave us pleasure. Yet, we must often spend time reading - and then responding to - that which neither informs us nor pleases us.

Both students and teachers suffer consequences of this weariness, of our attempts to please ourselves, our students, and those outside schools.

When we're tired, cranky, bored, it's difficult to give responses to student writing which matter to them. Students report they want enthusiasm, support, encouragement, just as any older writer. We all know this, and most of us work at it. But that makes us even more tired. As one of my teacher panelists asked, "Well, what do you do with raw emotion?" To extend her question - do you want to do anything with it? Would you rather it didn't happen in your room today? If you break down and tell Robbie that his piece is boring and perfunctory and that he must re-view it, what if Robbie makes a scene? and his mother calls? and the chairman asks you in for a chat? and you're up for evaluation this year?

Only the high school teachers I talked with hesitated, or refused, to say that the content of a paper affected their evaluations. Stockbrokers, journalists, biologists, social workers all said, "Of course it does!" Most English teachers would say, "Well, I suppose content does affect me, but it shouldn't." And we know students somehow expect that it shouldn't. How many times have you heard - or said - "Oh, he didn't give me a 'B' because he didn't agree with me." Perhaps it is tradition, or the effects of science on education which dictates that teachers somehow rise above their opinions and feelings and "see the paper pure." All that "rising above" is just one more thing that makes us tired.

Another aspect of this is that students know we must read their work, or at least a good portion of it. In his book, A Writer Teaches Writing, Donald Murray recommends telling a student outright that a paper is boring,

and sending him away to revise. I rarely find the nerve. One of my freshman writers did a short piece of work this fall, and when I told her it would be "published" in the classroom, she wailed, "I don't like what I wrote. I would have written it different if I'd known anyone but you would read it. It isn't very good."

It isn't very good to feel cranky and tired either, but my Sunday nights have been better - not great - but better, since I found a name and some reasons for the way I feel. I don't offer these observations as an apology, but rather as the way matters stand now. I know people come to conventions hoping to hear something concrete, to find solutions. Part of my solution rests in being alert to the way I feel, and why.

Another part of my solution is verrry long term. We must change student expectations and responses. We know that a person's expectations of what school should be are largely the result of his/her own school experiences. You know it: the "what was good for me, is good for my child," or "if I suffered through it, she should; suffering means you learned something." If your students have other kinds of experiences, perhaps they will have different expectations for their own children, and for us.

Some of my suggestions for radicalizing student expectations are old ones, but they're receiving new attention and focus these days, especially through the various state writing projects. In them, I hear echoes of my writers out-in-the-world. I've phrased these suggestions as questions for your consideration.

1. Is there something in the nature of many of the writing assignments we give which produces papers students don't want to write and teachers don't want to read? If so, what can we design to elicit writing they want to write, and we want to read?

2. Why do we assign the same paper, or the same topic, for every student, each semester?

3. Do we need to mark papers as thoroughly as we do? There's a good deal of evidence that there's little relationship between red ink and improvement in writing? And is it fair to young writers to imply, by our behaviors, that there is?

4. What would happen if we were as blunt with our "boringe" as we are with our "frags" and "incs" and awks?

5. How can we provide audiences other than the neutral teacher for writers? So that they can, in Ken Macrorie's words, write "writing to be read?"

6. Can we find ways to help people understand that smaller classes and fewer classes might be more cost effective in the long run?

7. Why is it that writing teachers who write themselves - are truly writing teachers - often seem to maintain their vitality, build their resistance to the Tired Teacher Syndrome?

Those are questions I've been trying to answer. It's helpful, I think, to consider answers in light of the special nature of our roles as evaluators, considering the inexperience and number of our clients, the routine and demands of curriculum, and our mandate as grammar guardians and citizen-makers and caring adult role models. Merely understanding my crankiness has been useful. If I notice the extra pen pressure in the circles around the "to be" verbs, or in my comment, "As you recall, the assignment called for the third person, not first," I can pull away, and the distance allows me to laugh. Distance is helpful for evalutors as well as for writers.

However, I must admit, I don't laugh as often as I'd like, and distance hasn't marked the papers I have waiting for me at home. Think of me Sunday night.